

**LAW ENFORCEMENT FOCUS GROUP MEETING SUMMARY  
DECEMBER 10, 2007; RICHMOND, VIRGINIA**

**GROUP PROFILE**

The Law Enforcement Focus Group was convened as part of a statewide effort to evaluate issues surrounding hunting with hounds in Virginia. This focus group was comprised of six law enforcement officers from the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, the National Park Service, State Parks, County Police, and State Police. Participants came from both the east and west side of the Blue Ridge Mountains; areas with deer, bear, raccoon, fox, and other types of hound hunting were represented. Collectively, these officers had over one hundred and eighteen years behind the badge (range = 14-22). All participants were Caucasian males.

One participant noted that he is a hound hunter himself. Another said that he had been bear hunting once, but had employees who were bear hound hunters and others who were landowners who have dealt with bear hound hunters.

**FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY**

The focus group was conducted for approximately two hours. During that time, participants responded to a series of questions posed by the facilitator (in bold, below). A summary of responses is provided below, including direct quotes from meeting participants that help to illustrate any common themes or key points from the discussion.

**How much time do you spend dealing with problems related to hunting with hounds? Who typically initiates a complaint—landowners, hound hunters, other hunters, or others? Can you estimate how many complaints you receive from those groups?**

Law enforcement officials in this focus group estimated that 10-15% of the hunting-related calls they receive are related to hound hunting. Complaints come from landowners, non-hound hunters, and National Forest visitors. Participants noted that they have also received complaints from bus drivers and postal workers about hound hunters “lining the roads”. It was noted that National Park visitors do not register many complaints, likely because they are less exposed to hound hunting, which takes place during a low point in Park visitation. In addition, state parks law enforcement officials contended that they do not receive many direct complaint calls because they are not a first response agency. Rather, they are often the ones with a complaint. Participants were sure to note that not all hound hunters behave badly, but the few that do are highly visible.

*“I’d say...anywhere from ten to twenty-five percent are specifically related to problems with hounds.”*

*“As far as complaints, we get very few from Park visitors. Part of that is, this is the slow time of year on the parkway. Most of our visitors this time of year are hunters.”*

*“When I was in Cumberland [it] was traffic issues. And was called in, a lot of times, not by hunters; just by passersby complaining about hunters in the road....”*

*“It’s just like anything else. There’s a few individuals doing, that ruin it for all the rest of ‘em. It doesn’t matter whether it’s a spot-lighter, a trespasser, or a dog hunter, there’s a few of ‘em that don’t do it ethically and they cause problems for everybody else.”*

*“There’s two types of clubs. You have a good club and a bad club. Both these guys have referred to that. And this goes mainly with deer hunting, I think, because of the clubs. But, a good club [has] a lot of contiguous acreage because they can actually draw stands in the morning, they can assign people to their stands, they’ll go to their stands, they can turn dogs loose, the dogs can stay in that same block of woods all morning, and people have opportunities to kill deer. The bad club...has turned bad because they lose land. And they have lots of land but it’s all in different parcels here and there, so they’re having to ride the roads to catch dogs, they’re having to ride the roads, they’re having to turn loose on one side of a piece of property to hunt the same amount of land.”*

*“We’re a little bit different agency and we’re not really a first responding agency.... Most of the stuff that we run into, we’re actually the complainant.”*

Participants indicated that hound hunters will sometimes complain about other hound hunters trespassing on their property or stealing or tying up someone else’s dogs. One participant had also seen non-hound hunters, frustrated by dogs disrupting a hunt, ‘relocate’ the dog to a far-away county for the hound hunter to retrieve. Participants also noted that hound hunters often have disputes over claims to certain individual wildlife.

*“Well, the other guys would come in and they would follow the locals around until they struck a bear. They’d run get in front of it, cut the dogs off, tie the dogs, and put their dogs out on the bear, and take off. Here comes the local guys up there and he’s got fifteen dogs tied up beside the road. And then there’s gonna be a fight. And I get called to that.”*

*“But, they’re hunting other people’s dogs. And that’s something between hunt clubs that deer hound hunters will do.”*

*“I can’t count how many times I’ve pulled up on a couple groups and, you know, they’re about ready to fight because this guy killed a bear over somebody else’s dogs.”*

Participants said that private landowner complaints typically are related to trespassing or abuse of the right-to-retrieve law. Some landowners are not aware of the right-to-retrieve law. Landowner complaints are also related to traffic issues; parking along or hunting from the right-of-way.

*“One of their presidents, vice presidents, whatever, stood in some woman’s driveway a few years ago and told her, ‘We hunted this property before you bought it, we’re going to continue to hunt this property. If we can’t get on it, we’re going to turn the dogs loose here, we’re going to run them across your property, we’re going to shoot the deer on the other side.’ He stood in her driveway and said, ‘There’s not a damn thing you can do about it.’”*

*“We get involved with a lot of the landowner complaints. They’ll call if they see somebody walking across their property to go get their dogs. They don’t think they can do it. You know, they’re not aware of the code section....Lot of ‘em move down from up north where, you know, they’re not used to it; it’s not a tradition.”*

*“Ninety-nine percent of the bear hunters that I’ve ever dealt with ride the roads, the Forest Service roads in Craig. You know, they’ll block off four thousand acres, but you’ll have a road all the way around it. They’ll let their dogs run around. The dogs are going; they’ve got their CB radios and tracking collars. The dog heads down a mountain—they post a road. And they’ll stand on the road waiting for the bear to cross. And the bear crosses; that’s where it gets killed, either in the road or adjacent to the road. And you’ve got people sight-seeing in the National Forest or hunting, you know, other game, and that’s all they see. They see fifty dogs and twenty hunters standing on the side of the road.”*

*“Most of the people, if they’d ask, it was no problem. But they figured out that we don’t have to ask ‘em and we heard the comment, ‘Well, my dogs can’t read,’ several times....They seem to find ways to aggravate people.”*

*“But that was one complaint that I received a lot as a game warden was traffic issues, where they’re parked in the road.”*

*“I had them flipping off bus drivers. This bus driver called ‘cause she couldn’t get through and I’m standing there and they’re flipping this bus driver off ‘cause she called on ‘em ‘cause she couldn’t get past their trucks.”*

*“Postal people too had complaints about trying to get down the road.”*

Participants noted that non-hound hunter complaints, often from black powder or archery hunters, are typically related to hunt disruption. At the same time, hound hunters complain of being “short standed” by muzzleloader hunters who shoot big bucks early in the season.

*“Actually, when black powder started getting pretty popular, it almost seemed spiteful, because they weren’t getting to hunt yet....And these guys were killing some big bucks. Well, then, they’re short standing their own people by killing the bucks earlier in the year than the other guys. So, then, what they’re doing is running dogs while the other guys are on stands or coming in ‘cause they don’t want people to be able to kill the deer before they have a chance to kill the deer.”*

Participants also indicated that stray hounds are a problem in some areas.

*“The hound hunters that don’t take care of their dogs as well as others do and they leave their dogs out and then they end up in the park, bothering campers. Most of the stray dogs that we deal with throughout the year are hunting breeds.”*

**Are there current laws or regulations that govern hound hunting, trespass, etc. that are working? Are there some that are not? How can they be improved upon?**

Participants asserted that increased technology has made law enforcement more challenging to carry out. Hound hunters often use CB radios to communicate with each other and evade law enforcement officials. Participants also pointed to loopholes in existing laws. One loophole that allows deer hound hunters to run as fox hound hunters or bear hound hunters to run as raccoon hound hunters, further frustrates efforts to enforce chase and hunting regulations. Another, that only prohibits shooting from the right of way, makes it difficult to deal with traffic complaints. And another allows people to go on private lands and run deer, under the pretext of retrieving their dog.

*“They set pickets around where they are hunting and there’s no way to get a green vehicle into ‘em. As soon as you come by one, you hear them on the side band radio or the other radio saying—their nickname for me was ‘the red dog’—you’d hear ‘em saying, ‘The red dog’s coming,’ and then they squirt out everywhere. And they’d just leave their dogs and come back the next morning.”*

*“Once we got into ‘em and they chased bear all day long. Soon as it got dark, these bear dogs become raccoon dogs. And we finally pieced it on the same hunters, hunting the same mountain and we put enough together and we had two really good judges that were hunters to prove that they were bear hunting over legal hours and on Sunday. They use that excuse to me of raccoon chase season. They’ll chase bear during raccoon chase season. They seem, they go, they take every little crack in our laws, and all, and use to violate the laws. They know what they’re doing.”*

*“They use the exact same ones. They run ‘em in the fox pen. There’s no deer, they run foxes. They turn ‘em loose and they run them all year long and they say he’s a fox dog. Except for the hard-core pure bred fox hounds where they get all dressed up and ride on horseback. I had one of them tell me that if one of their dogs runs a deer, they get rid of it. But, the other guys, they use the same dogs all the time and they run ‘em all year long. Some of them, not all of them, but some of them.”*

*“A lot of counties...they can stand in the road, which they will. The only law that they will violate is shooting from the road. But that one shot takes a millisecond for us to catch ‘em, but they’re standing in the road. And most of these places they’re hunting, they’re thick as can be and the only open shot they have is up and down that road or the right-of-way of the road.”*

*“Because under 18-2-137, I believe it is, he can go upon lands of another to retrieve his hounds, as long as he doesn’t have a gun or vehicle. Well, all that is is free pass to drive your dogs across and then I run across a landowner, ‘Oh, I’m trying to catch my dogs.’ Well then why’d*

*you just turn ‘em loose if you’re trying to catch ‘em? And I’ve had landowners see the people turn ‘em loose. And then they come across there. Then, when I get there, oh we’re trying to catch ‘em.”*

Participants discussed the applicability of the right-to-retrieve law on Federal land. Participants said that repeated requests for hunters to make contact prior to retrieving hounds on federal land have often failed, but acknowledged that they have not filed any charges because they are uncertain about how a judge would respond to the case.

*“That code section may be the gateway to hunting on a National Park....we’ve tried to work with them and tell them, you know, just come and get us, call us, come by, whatever.”*

*“Their fear of being charged federally and then versus them making a charge and then a guy get out of it. Then, once that one guy got out of it, they would have no control.”*

### **What can be done to help people in law enforcement be most effective in dealing with issues surrounding hunting with hounds?**

Participants discussed a number of things that could be done to improve the effectiveness of law enforcement in dealing with hound hunting issues including making a statewide law about hunting from the road, developing consistent laws, utilizing task forces to pressure problem areas, educating landowners about the right-to-retrieve law, conservation minded judges, and encouraging compliance with the law.

*“We have multi-jurisdictional task forces for drug operations, for everything else....I just think that if we work together better....there’s a lot of other resources between the other agencies that would help you guys.”*

*“Hunting from the roadway. I think that would take care of a whole lotta this problem....I know some counties have it a hundred yards, some it’s fifty feet. It’s just ridiculous how many different ones there are. It ought to be made uniform.”*

*“You gonna have to educate some of these people, you know, who have no exposure or have had no exposure to deer hunting and they come down here from New Jersey or New York, whatever and they’re unfamiliar with it.”*

*“Quit giving them so many outs.”*

*“Stiffer penalty...take their gun, take their hunting license. I tell ya, if people feel like they’re gonna lose their privilege to hunt, lose their gun, or lose their truck....People say, ‘I don’t wanna get caught doin’ this.’”*

### **Are there any other questions that this group needs to discuss?**

Participants noted that too many regulations might make people quit hound hunting and hoped that wouldn't happen. They discussed some of the regulations that other southeastern states have adopted to address hound hunting. One participant noted that hound hunting is good because it brings kids into the sport. Finally, participants noted that hunter's safety can only teach so much with regards to ethics and stressed that parents, clubs, and peers need to set a strong example.

## SUMMARY

The law enforcement focus group was attended by officers from a variety of jurisdictions and agencies across the state of Virginia. All officers had first-hand experience responding to complaints related to hound hunting. Officers chronicled an exhaustive list of issues and indicated that they respond to conflicts between hound hunters, between non-hound and hound hunters, between hound hunters and landowners, and others. Issues that surfaced repeatedly included trespassing, hunting out of season or hours, and hunting from the roads or blocking traffic. It seemed that most hound hunting issues officers in this focus group encountered were related to deer and bear hound hunters. In addition, officers were quick to note that not all hound hunters cause problems, but those that do are highly visible and persistent. Officers believed that consistent laws, closing loopholes in existing laws, stiffer penalties for violations, and increased education of hunters, landowners, and others would help make enforcement more effective.